

Prologue: The Lost Eye

Britain has suffered its worst train accident in many years. Twenty-three people were killed when this morning's scheduled Paris-Edinburgh train hit a train which was apparently shunted onto the same track in error. Names of the dead have not yet been released.

(BBC News, 12 April 2041)

In a small glass jar full of 70 percent alcohol, a human eye was jostled and jogged by the movement of the train. *A few more hours*, Tricia Jenkins thought, tapping the shoulder bag for the thousandth time to check that the jar was still unbroken. *Then I can hand over this horrible thing and be free of it. I never thought I'd get through customs.* Recent drug-smuggling incidents and a surge in illegal immigrants had made the UK authorities very diligent in screening passengers arriving from France; but the sealing wax on the jar had remained intact, and she had passed into Britain unmolested, the eye undetected.

She had kept the bag on her lap for the tedious journey through the London sprawl, through Cambridgeshire, steadily traveling North. *Why couldn't Nicole have her laboratory in London? Why in Scotland?* She knew this eye had to be analysed; she resented the journey to deliver it.

She gave a sigh, and the man opposite her looked up from his tablet and smiled. She smiled back.

The crash gave no warning. Her carriage, fifth from the front, lifted from the tracks, tossing everyone from their seats. A deafening sound of screaming brakes applied too late; a roar of bending steel; bags tumbling from luggage racks; food, hot drinks and bottles of water flying everywhere. As did the passengers.

Tricia was hit by the man who'd smiled at her; a glancing blow but enough to knock her over. When the worst of the sound had ended, and she could focus her eyes, she saw he was lying a few metres away from her. She thought he'd escaped major injury, but then noticed the jagged steel that had detached itself from one of the doors and had been driven through his face and out the back of his skull.

Slowly, she eased herself upright. *I'm alive*, she thought. *I don't believe it*. She and most of the other occupants of the carriage were lucky; their compartment was still more or less the right way up. Around her, more noises. Distant wails from the travelling companions of the dead; curses from a man close by, whose glasses had smashed.

Trish herself seemed uninjured. Her shoulder bag had separated itself from where she was sitting and ended up buried by the steel that had killed her fellow passenger. She retrieved her phone; swiping to medcare mode, the camera quickly identified a few bad cuts and bruises to her face, but that seemed to be it. As for the bag, irretrievably wedged by the debris, it was worryingly flat, and damp. Her extreme caution in carrying the jar had been wasted.

She felt sick. *All that trouble*. After a few more minutes, she forced open the nearest door and stepped gingerly onto the ground; slowly, limping slightly, she walked away from the wreckage.

She clambered up a bank, noticing, despite the grim circumstances, bumblebees visiting early wildflowers growing in colourful clumps along the railway cutting. They were, Trish guessed, somewhere in the Yorkshire countryside. Tricia could hear sirens as police and ambulance personnel made their way to the crash scene. *I'll have to pick an identity that'll cover my tracks*. She took out her phone again, planning to call her boyfriend, but changing her mind and calling her boss instead.

Voicemail. Shit. Ah well, it'll have to be short and sweet.

She took a deep breath, still fighting waves of nausea, and now shaking with relief and shock.

'Emma. My train just crashed. I'm okay ... but I lost the eye. We might need that second one after all.'

Chapter 1: The arrival

Encyclopaedia entry for Cube (alien), last updated 13 February 2040

Individuals of the alien species called Cubes, because of their shape when at rest, made their presence known on January 3, 2040.

Detective Sergeant Josephine Murray was driving home after an 18-hour shift. It hadn't been her *most* interesting day on the force; she and a colleague had spent the entire time gazing at the front door of a private residence where, they hoped, a bank robber wanted for several high-profile hold-ups would appear to visit his ailing mother - even at the risk of being arrested.

The man failed to show. The two police officers had spent most of the time wondering why such stakeouts hadn't been outsourced to the drone division. *But there it is, what can you do?* Jo thought to herself. *Jeez, I am so looking forward to getting some sleep.*

DS Murray was medium tall, of average build, with long mousy blonde hair and a fondness for brightly coloured jackets and trousers. She was well-liked for her sense of humour and her team attitude – not always evident in ambitious police officers. Her reputation had been boosted when, pregnant with twins, and just starting labour, she'd tackled a schizophrenic armed with a butcher's knife who was holding his own mother hostage. Miraculously, a slash above her right eye was her only injury: a deep scar that ached occasionally. When he had learned this, her husband Mark had nicknamed her Potter, promising to only call her this in private.

She dialled home.

'Hi!' Her husband grinned at her. Behind him, she could see a pile of baby clothes ready for the wash.

'On my way.'

‘Did your chap turn up?’

‘No, the bastard. He was a no-show. I don’t think he loves his mum at all.’

Her husband chuckled as she winked at him.

‘And after everything you’ve done for him, Jo!’

She giggled. Mark always knew how to make her laugh. ‘I know. We even had fresh doughnuts for him ... How are the kids?’

‘Well, both asleep at the moment, thank God. They were rough earlier. I’ll ask you to take over for a bit when you’ve had a kip.’

‘A kip? I feel like sleeping for a year. What...’

It was at that point that she saw a crowd of people running out of the very large warehouse she was passing. It was a key Amazon distribution centre and, naturally, the biggest employer in the area. Even from the road, she could see that it looked like a mass evacuation, and judging by their demeanour, not a scheduled one.

‘I’ll call you back.’

She put on the blue flashing light and headed for the entrance, screeching to a halt at the security barrier.

‘What’s the disturbance?’

‘No clue.’ The woman in the security cubicle looked about eighteen years old.

‘Let me through, I’ll check it out. *Now*, please.’

The guard raised the barrier for her and she drove, as fast as she could, to where most of the people were exiting. People ran towards her as she parked.

‘Detective Sergeant Murray.’

She held up her ID to the group standing closest to her and clicked her bodycam on.

‘What’s going on?’

‘One of the big boxes...’ A middle-aged woman with work uniform and headscarf gesticulated in the direction of the building they’d all just vacated. ‘It talked to us,’ she said, with a soft Caribbean accent.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What she said.’ A second person stepped forward, a tall, thin man of pale complexion and an impressive red beard. ‘The box just started talking. Changed colour, too.’

Mass hallucinations are impossible, Jo thought. Oh, why couldn’t I just have gone straight home? I need more Brownie points with Mark than I do with the boss. Okay, stop whining, Josephine Murray. ‘Right, madam, sir,’ she said, ‘please show me where it was.’

Her brisk but courteous manner, and impressive scar, quelled any objections. She followed them back into the building.

A vast space greeted her. Conveyor belts linked what looked to be an infinity of shelves groaning under the weight of a million boxes of every size. All the workers appeared to have fled, and there was an oppressive silence.

‘Booties,’ said the man.

‘What?’

‘Put these on,’ he said, holding out disposable shoe coverings.

She did so, as did her companions. With their footfall softened, the interior felt more and more like a cathedral whose worshippers had left for the night.

They shuffled deeper into the building.

There was a sudden noise to their right. They all jumped, and DS Murray felt for her Taser. A small packing box that had been teetering on top of a hodgepodge of other boxes had toppled onto the ground.

‘So is your talking box that size?’

‘No, much bigger,’ the woman said.

‘How do we find it?’ Jo wondered if some electronic gizmo had turned itself on.

‘It was over here,’ the woman said, pointing towards the right where some boxes the size of dishwashers and desks were clustered together, accompanied by a forklift truck decorated with the red cross of a small English flag.

‘And it wasn’t one of these toy robots that all the kids are crazy about?’

The red-bearded man laughed.

‘Oh no. This is nothing like a robot.’

The three of them walked along an aisle, the workers leading, with Murray becoming claustrophobic as boundless numbers of shelves and boxes still towered above them. There were colour-coded lights and touch screens at the end of each section, but she still felt she’d need a top-of-the-range satnav not to get lost.

With the suspension in operations, the quiet was so deep that DS Murray could hear the distant sound from the ring road traffic. That, and a crinkling sound from their shoe covers, were the only things she could register.

Josephine was by nature courageous, but there was something surreal about this search. She hoped that her bodycam wouldn’t show her jumping out of her skin when she encountered ... whatever it was.

Deeper still.

And then she heard a man's voice behind them.

'Good evening, Josephine Murray.'

She jerked in surprise, but her training instincts took over. As she spun around, her left hand grabbed her Taser and she crouched, ready to fire.

She was looking at a box, a cube of one metre or so. It was glowing with some internal light source, a pale green colour, with a darker speckling that was moving from one face of the cube to another.

'There is no reason to be afraid. I am among the first to be with you.'

The voice was that of a man, and was warm, polite, reassuring.

DS Murray thought hard. *It knows my name. This has got to be a dream. I must be asleep at the wheel or something.* She gripped the Taser even tighter. *No, that feels too solid for a nightmare.*

'What are you?' she asked. 'Where did you come from?' Her brain tossed aside any further thoughts of this thing being a toy made by humans.

'We are here to study and help you. We will work with the One who is now speaking with the British Parliament.'

The woman who had accompanied her spoke up.

'We're being invaded?' There was fear, and some anger, in her voice.

'Oh no,' the alien answered. 'We're on *your* side.'

DS Murray rubbed her eyes, her lack of sleep catching up with her.

'There's another...' She struggled to find the most diplomatic word. '... visitor like you talking to the Members of Parliament? So what do you want? I mean you, personally, here?'

A brief pause, then the object spoke again.

‘We will need liaison staff, Josephine Murray. You are my chosen friend.’

Then she was plunged into darkness.